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Isneg



The laziness of the Isneg man has become almost proverbial in Apayaw; he resents it of course, but what can be done about it? The Isneg are living in one of the richest provinces of the Philippines agriculturally, and nevertheless these last years, famine has desolated the land at every turn.

Once while at Alumani, I went to visit a few friends: three of them, the father and his two sturdy sons, the older one a widower, the younger one a bachelor, were living together in a house surrounded by the most fertile fields imaginable; and still they complained and said that they were starving to death, because there were no women to till the soil.

The year 1928 was a lean one almost all over the province, but Karagawan men preferred to squat down in their houses and feed on the flowers of the coconut tree rather than come to Kabugaw and earn a ganta (three liters) of rice a day by doing work that could easily be done by boys of twelve years of age: this work was too hard for them.

About the same time I had to go to Bayag, which is some forty miles distant from Kabugaw, a two days' walk. I sent my carriers one day ahead and gave them rations of rice for two days, in order to preclude any excuse for their not reaching their destination at least at the same time as myself. The next day I met the fellows about noon, sitting in a little hut some ten miles from home and cooking their last meal but one. Having rice they did not care for anything else. They had passed a day and a half walking ten miles, cooking rice, chewing betel nut, and . . . resting.

I could adduce a score of examples like this, all from personal experience. But after all why should we blame the Isneg for it? They were reared in years of plenty, when the smallest amount of work brought the largest possible returns; at the beginning of the lean years they consumed all the rice that had been hoarded up for years; and now the hard times have come: when a tree has been growing in a slanting direction for several years, can you make it lean to the other side in its old age? The Bontok Igorot is industrious and always ready to handle a job that may bring him some money; but he is living among rocks and cliffs, where even weeds and grasses refuse to thrive. The Isneg on the contrary are living in an exceedingly fertile country: up to recent times their district was closed to the outside world for lack of roads, and this prevented them from conducting active trade on any large scale and from selling the surplus

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461 of their products to the members of other tribes living in less favored
251 surroundings. Why should they have worked for things with which
433 they could do nothing? Add to this that their needs have always
487 been so very small that they would not have known what to do with
152 the money that would have been given them in exchange for their crops.

It may perhaps be hoped that the members of the younger generation will be less deserving of the reputation of laziness rightly affixed to the Isneg name, as they have never seen the fat years of their fathers, and so will more or less become inured to hard work. But when the years of plenty are again at the door, will they resist the temptation of resting from their exertions? Civilization is bringing them new needs, and roads are being opened to allow them to get rid advantageously of their superfluous crops: so there may be change.

461 On one of my first visits to Nagbabalayan, I was sitting one evening
152 with a large group of Isneg, old and young, on the porch of the teacher's house. It was dark, and the Isneg were asking questions about sun and moon, about light and darkness, etc. So it happened in the course of the conversation that I referred to the protracted darkness of the regions around the poles, where the sun would not rise for months at a time. On hearing this, a young Isneg man, quite exultant at the prospect, exclaimed with enthusiasm: "What a fine thing! Not to have to work for months! I wish we were living in a place like that". That's the Isneg; how he would curse old Adam, if he could but read the first chapters of Genesis.

152 The Isneg are also very easily dejected in time of sickness, and at the approach of any kind of hardship. The Karagawan case just mentioned would perhaps better have been placed here: it was really a case of utter dejection on account of the terrible famine that desolated their settlement, a thing they had never yet experienced in their whole life.

A few months ago I went down the Apayaw, and at a certain moment one of my rowers inadvertently cut himself with a headax that was lying on the bottom of the canoe: the wound was not at all serious, but the man lost a good amount of blood. For more than an hour he remained sitting in the boat without moving his oar, his face the picture of utter woe and desolation: you might have thought he was in a dying condition. He arose from his stupor and was his old self again only a long time after the blood had stopped flowing. Avoidance of hardship, not endurance, is a part of the Isneg system; hence their poor resistance to the blows of an adverse fortune.

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of the soil that are cultivated among the Isneg. This little treatise on Isneg agriculture might have been written by a native, as I try to put mysdlf as much as possible in the place of the Isneg.

## I. Isneg Farming in General

It is freely stated all over Apayaw that, in former times, rice was always abundant in each and every village. Not to have old rice (*kópag*) in store, meaning "rice that had been reaped one or more years previously",[1] was the exception rather than the rule; and there were always in existence a goodly number of granaries where rice was kept that had been harvested up to four years back.

A famine (*dasmág* or *ulát*), under the circumstances, might be called an unknown entity, were it not that *dasmág* and *ulát* are genuine Isneg terms, and so that the thing they refer to must have made its appearance at least occasionally. Actually, however, every few years one hears about a famine devastating the land and bringing in its wake a tremendous amount of distress and misery. The children, of course, are usually the most to be pitied, as they are liable to be permanently affected by the lack of sufficient nourishment.

It might be objected that Apayaw is a rich agricultural country, that it is covered with vegetation throughout the year, that rice is not the only crop that can be raised with advantage, that there is an abundance of tropical forests containing plenty of trees and plants of which one or more parts are edible, and consequently that starvation must be impossible. To this I must answer that the cause is not to be found in the soil or in the climatic conditions of the country, but in the character of its inhabitants. The Isneg is easily dejected, he cannot stand adversity; if his ordinary means of sustenance fail, he is at a loss what to do, he just sits down and moons. Even when remunerative work is offered to him, an Isneg who has not the usual amount of rice at his disposal has rarely the courage to perform it: he is simply down.

Fortunately the average Isneg woman shows herself much more courageous, and, where her husband proves a dismal failure, she it

[1] Rice that has been kept for one or two years, because its owners, being in mourning for a dead child, abstained from eating it, is called *diúnág*. In native words occurring in the present paper the accent (') is placed over the accented vowel. Accented *n* (*ń*) denotes the ng sound in English "bring". For full phonetic key, see M. Vanoverbergh. The Isneg. Publ. Cath. Anthrop. Conf., 1932, v. 3, no. 1, pp. 3-4.

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is who finds a means to keep the wolf from the door. On occasions like these, it is clearly apparent how training and experience have rendered the Isneg girl fit for meeting almost any kind of emergency, while the customary indolence of the male makes him an easy prey to downheartedness, so much so that he becomes utterly unable to save himself and his family from the pangs of hunger.

If we come to consider the situation from the point of view of the Isneg, it is not to be wondered at that nowadays famines are of rather frequent occurrence in Apayaw. Indeed, foreign authorities have invaded the land: not understanding the position of the Isneg with reference to the tutelary spirits of the country, they have all but extirpated headhunting. What can be expected after this? Being denied their usual offerings, the spirits stop protecting the crops. It is true that the Isneg does not cease to propitiate them by all possible means, but the great sacrifice has been rendered almost impossible, and so the fields have become a prey to evil imps, while the protectors of the rice, the purveyors of the Isneg, have become either powerless or indifferent.

Nevertheless, under ordinary circumstances, the average Isneg raises enough rice to last him and his family for a year. He may not be able to store it up for future consumption, but what he has usually keeps him alive from one harvest to the next, and besides almost always allows him to offer an occasional sacrifice to the spirits and to invite his relatives and neighbors to the ceremony. Such is the normal state of affairs with the great majority of the people.

Now in almost every agglomeration one will find at least one man who is styled "rich" (*ba-nâń*), a man who raises rice in abundance (*arugammây*) and consequently is able to offer one or more solemn sacrifices every year and to provide food to the inhabitants of several villages for days at a time. However, these so-called rich people do not fare any better than the average citizen, as their surplus is easily consumed at their *sây-âm* or solemn sacrifices.

On the other hand, there are always a few who may be called poor (*nakimrût*): their rice, if they raise any at all, never lasts them the whole year round, and, in the meanwhile, they have to content themselves with Indian corn, yams, taro and the rest; but only in times of famine, are they obliged to feed on coconut flowers and other outlandish foods. Others again seem never to be able to make both ends meet: these are the *sîbud*; their rice, which should be sufficient for ordinary persons, is usually gone almost before they are aware of it,

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and, in any case, it is much too easily consumed to allow them any degree of comfort.

Several reasons may be assigned for the exceptional poverty of these people. The spirit *Laṅdúsān* is very often the culprit. If it happens through his machinations that people are brought to the verge of starvation, the latter are said to be *malaṅdúsān*. Sometimes, too, a want of civic spirit that has been observed in a certain person, may induce other people to pray the spirits to have his plants consumed by animals, and consequently to cause him to become poor. In such a case, the enemies of this unworthy citizen are said to *maglábuy*.

Other people are simply *nakurmáṅ*, they are unlucky: they cannot raise anything on their fields, and the result is wretchedness and want of food.

It may also happen that some people are unable to complete any kind of work in their rice fields: they are *nadannág*. Whatever they try to accomplish, whether planting or weeding, whether clearing a field or fencing it, they can never bring it to a finish. This, of course, almost inevitably leads to poverty and ultimately ends in the lack of the necessary livelihood. Nevertheless there is an easy remedy to this sad situation: the only thing to be done is to prepare *inapúxān* (betel for chewing), and to offer it to the spirit in charge by laying it down somewhere within his reach, at the same time reciting the following prayer, which was given me by *Púlog* from Dangla (O dialect, Main branch):[2]

*Iápugko iáw aníto ta dínā- pagdandannaxán* (I offer betel [for chewing] to you, spirit, so that you do not make me lazy).[3]

A rather remote, but very real cause of destitution, is a person's habit of being late (*nekábut*) whenever some work has to be done. In such a case the only means for him to escape being numbered sooner or later among the needy is to shake off his inbred torpor and to imitate his more diligent companions.

In this connection I should be allowed to mention the lines of the hand, as the art of palmistry is far from being unknown among the Isneg, and a person who is *rappád*, which means that one of the lines

[2] The way to prepare *inapúxān* will soon be explained at length. For explanation of Isneg dialects and branches, see M. Vanoverbergh, Isneg Life Cycle, II, Marriage, Death, and Burial, Publ. Cath. Anthrop. Conf., 1938, v. 3, no. 3, pp. 261-64.

[3] Lest I be prevented from finishing my work. This is said only of work in the rice fields: clearing land, planting rice, etc.

with a row of feathers; a head band of small beads, *sajaban;* earrings, *lubay;* a necklace of larger beads, *ambusao;* red spangles hanging from back of the head, *bajuoyboy;* red spangles hanging on forehead, *pati;* small anklet beads, *pasag;* a bead wrist band, *sinali,* and a silver ring, *sankilat.* Her lips are made red with betel nut, *ma-ma,* and she makes a charming picture. The man also has a striking appearance, being dressed in his breechcloth or G-string, *abag;* red-embroidered black pull-on shirt, *baddo;* bag, *pulsa;* neckband with a handsome shell breast-piece, *bising;* and an ornamented head dress formed of red and blue cloth entwined in a turban, *linijot.* This is topped with odorous leaves.

The people have no knowledge of weaving or pottery making. They obtain their clothing, pots, salt, and other materials from Ilocano traders in exchange for their honey, beeswax, rope, baskets and mats.

## FAMILY LIFE AND OCCUPATIONS

The people live in substantially constructed houses which have artistic lines. The usual size is about 20 x 34 feet. In building a house, the four long, sturdy corner posts and two central side posts are first set in the ground. They are shaped from some very hard and durable timber such as *molave* or *ipil.* On these posts the structure is framed with heavy, hand-hewn lumber. The timbers are so neatly hewn with miter, bead, feather, and tongue joints that they do not require further fastening. The roof is finished first. Three heavy, well-braced trusses rest on the posts. Their bearing, or upper sides are hewn into an outward bow which will shape the roof in an equilateral